

Transnational Education: A Digest of a Work in Progress

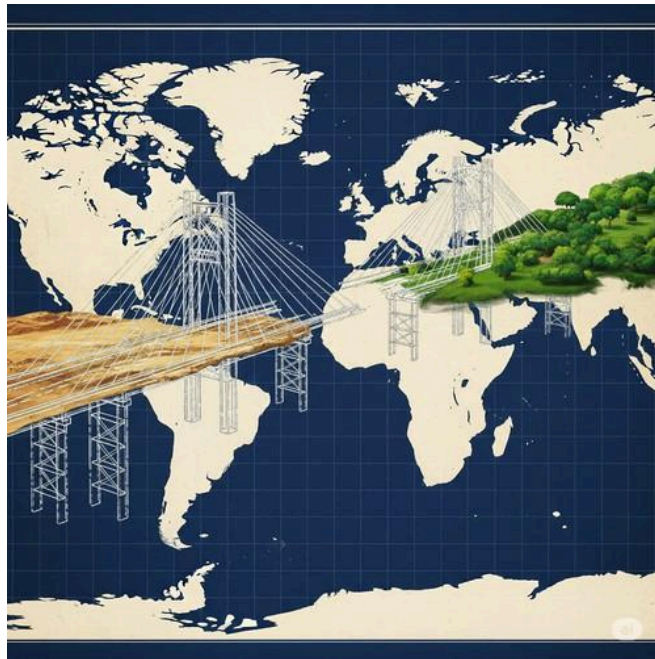


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Transnational Education Overview

Transnational Education (TNE) stands as a continually evolving and complex landscape within global higher education. Also known as cross-border education, TNE encompasses all types and modes of delivery of higher education study programs, sets of courses, or educational services where learners are in a different country from the one where the awarding institution is based. This inherent dynamism, coupled with its rapid expansion, makes TNE an actual “work in progress” that requires ongoing understanding and adaptation from all stakeholders, particularly credential evaluators.

This broad concept can also be defined as providing academic qualifications from educational institutions in one country to students living and studying in another. The Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education further elaborates on “cross-border education” as all educational delivery modes that involve the movement of people, knowledge, programs, providers, and curriculum across borders.

Navigating the varied models, advantages, and significant challenges of TNE, particularly concerning quality assurance and recognition, necessitates a meticulous and informed approach, with credential evaluators playing a pivotal role in ensuring the fairness and consistency of recognition decisions.



A. Types and Models of TNE

TNE includes a diverse range of models and partnerships, reflecting varied levels of collaboration and resource intensity. Please note that references to institutions and countries are correct at the time of publication and are subject to change.

Branch Campus or Center: A Higher Education Institution (HEI) establishes a campus or study center abroad where its faculty deliver teaching. The degree is awarded by the provider HEI or its branch. Examples include New York University (NYU) campuses in Abu Dhabi and Shanghai, Duke Kunshan University in China, and the University of Wollongong in Dubai.

Franchise Program: A provider HEI authorizes a partner HEI in another country to deliver its approved study program. The sending institution (franchiser) is responsible for curriculum, degree conferral, and accreditation, while the partner institution teaches the content. The student receives a single degree from the sending institution.

Validated Program: One institution (the “sending institution”) evaluates and endorses a curriculum developed and delivered by an international partner. While the sending institution handles accreditation and degree issuance, the international partner has greater flexibility in curriculum design. A key example is the Arab Open University (AOU) offering a program validated by the UK's Open University (OU).

Joint Degree Program: Two or more HEIs partner to provide a single collaborative program, resulting in one degree certificate awarded by all participating universities. Students typically study at multiple partner campuses.

Double/Dual Degree Program: Two HEIs partner to provide a collaborative program where each HEI awards its own distinct degree, resulting in two separate qualifications. Students study at both institutions with faculty involvement from both.

Twinning Program/Articulation Agreement: A provider HEI collaborates with a partner HEI with the provider awarding the complete their studies at the provider HEI's location.

Distance Delivery: Programs delivered entirely via distance technology (online) to students in other countries. This mode has grown rapidly, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Off-shore Institutions: Autonomous institutions established in one country whose organization and content align with the educational systems of another country. Unlike branch campuses, they do not have a direct parent awarding institution in the referenced country (e.g., The American University in Dubai).

International HE Institutions: These institutions do not officially belong to any national higher education system and are typically established by international organizations or treaties, like the European University Institute.

Multinational Corporate Universities: Launched by large transnational corporations, these institutions offer their own qualifications that do not belong to any national system, often focusing on labor market relevance over traditional accreditation.



B. Advantages and Drivers of TNE

The expansion of TNE is driven by benefits for all stakeholders:

- **For Provider Institutions:** TNE enhances internationalization, boosts institutional stature, and provides a valuable alternative revenue stream. It also fosters long-term relationships with international peers.
- **For Host Institutions and Countries:** TNE provides access to desirable educational resources, increases educational capacity cost-effectively, and helps meet student demand. It also creates a pathway to the broader economy.
- **For Students:** TNE enables access to top-tier academic programs and prestigious degrees at a potentially lower cost without migrating internationally. This can lead to more opportunities and benefits like fewer visa challenges, rich cultural exchange, and better local job prospects.

C. Challenges and Concerns in TNE

Despite its advantages, TNE faces significant challenges, particularly concerning quality assurance and recognition.

- **Recognition and Portability:** A major concern is ensuring the international recognition and portability of diverse TNE qualifications.
- **Lack of Coordinated Governance:** There is a notable absence of coordinated governance and regulated policies across the TNE landscape.
- **Transparency and Trust:** Varying levels of transparency and a lack of shared quality assurance frameworks can lead to a lack of trust in TNE operations.
- **Document Identification:** TNE credentials can be hard to differentiate from other foreign credentials, as documents may not clearly indicate the teaching location or TNE arrangement.
- **Quality Assurance Deficiencies:** Not all quality assurance agencies comprehensively check the quality of programs organized in other countries, raising concerns about comparability.
- **Fraud and Misinformation:** The rise of fake colleges, accreditors, and document falsification poses a serious risk. Claims of being “internationally recognized” can be a red flag.
- **Discrepancy between Academic and Professional Recognition:** A qualification might be legally recognized for professional purposes in one country but not be considered academically equivalent for further study due to quality concerns.

D. Quality Assurance and Recognition Frameworks

Quality assurance provides the essential foundation upon which trust can be built, making recognition possible.

International Conventions

- **Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC):** This convention establishes that a qualification granting access to higher education in one signatory state should generally do so in others, unless a “substantial difference” is shown. The LRC allows countries to make TNE recognition contingent on national legislation or specific agreements. The Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee adopted the Revised Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education in June 2007, including principles which should be respected in transnational education. ENIC-NARIC offices follow these principles/criteria when assessing any TNE.
- **UNESCO Global Recognition Convention:** This convention, effective March 2023, addresses “cross-border education” and underscores the importance of ensuring no quality differences exist between learners in the home or host country, regardless of delivery format.

TNE Quality Benchmark (TNE QB)

Developed by Ecctis, the TNE QB is an independent peer-review scheme designed to improve international confidence in TNE qualifications. A successful review grants graduates a Certificate of Comparability and allows the TNE operation to use the TNE QB Quality Mark.

Key Principles for Quality Provision

- Academic quality and standards of TNE programs should be comparable to those of the parent institution.
- Transparency in information provided to prospective students is crucial.
- Staff must be proficient in their qualifications, teaching, and research.
- The awarding institution is ultimately responsible for the qualification.
- Admission, teaching, and assessment requirements should be comparable to those of programs delivered by the awarding institution.
- In relevant countries, the Diploma Supplement is a vital tool for transparency, clearly indicating the nature of the qualification (e.g., joint degree, TNE arrangement).

National Approaches to TNE Regulation

Regulations vary significantly across countries. For example:

- Portugal generally prohibits franchise-mode TNE.
- Greece is drafting new legislation for non-state universities, as degrees from its many franchised “Colleges” are not currently academically recognized by the national body (DOATAP).
- Italy requires specific accreditation procedures for foreign institutions operating in its territory.
- Spain regulates TNE through its Organic Law, requiring recognition processes for TNE qualifications to grant professional or academic rights.
- Slovenia requires TNE to comply with national legislation in both the sending and receiving countries.

E. Role of Credential Evaluators

Evaluating TNE credentials requires a meticulous approach.

Key Evaluation Questions

Evaluators must ascertain:

- Who awards the degree and do they have proper authority?
- Who teaches the program and what was the mode of instruction?
- Is the degree recognized in both the home and host countries?
- Is the teaching institution recognized?
- Does the issuing institution have the right to operate in the host country?
- What was the specific type of TNE agreement?
- Which HEI issues the official documents?

Essential Steps

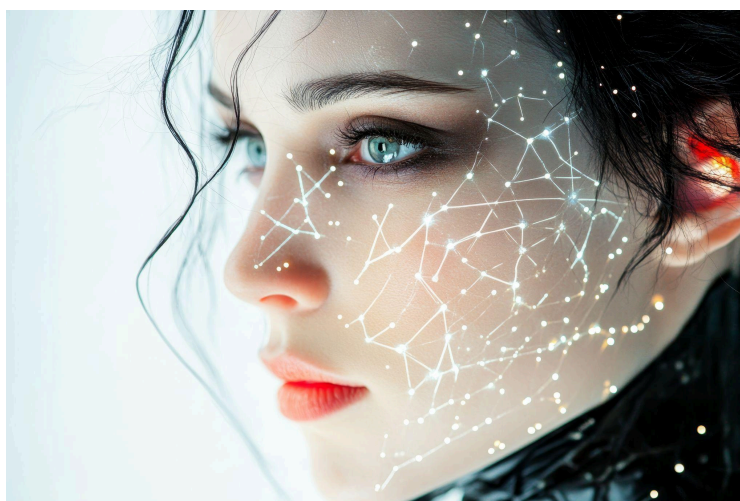
1. **Determine Program Type:** Identify if the credential is from a joint, dual, franchise, or validated program.
2. **Verify Degree Conferral:** Confirm which institution(s) awarded the degree.
3. **Examine Accreditation:** Ensure the awarding institution(s) are accredited and check for program-level recognition.
4. **Reference Location and Curriculum:** Consider where the study took place and who designed/delivered the curriculum.
5. **Check Entry Requirements and Duration:** Compare these with the equivalent program in the awarding institution's home country.

6. **Consider Language of Instruction:** Assess the language, especially if it differs from the awarding institution's primary language.
7. **Utilize Research Tools:** Employ resources available like AACRAO EDGE, TAICEP, ENIC-NARIC, and institutional websites.
8. **Consistency for IBCs:** If an International Branch Campus is accredited and issues degrees through the home campus, evaluators should treat the credentials as they would any other from that institution.

F. Future of TNE

TNE continues to evolve and expand globally. A significant trend is the shift towards online education, which is less visible than traditional campus-based TNE. This growth is intertwined with the rise of private higher education, which now accounts for over 50% of HE institutions globally and often operates with commercial objectives. Given this expansion, there is a pressing need for clearer and stronger accreditation, quality assurance, and standards from national and international bodies to address emerging regulatory and ethical concerns and to safeguard against fraud.

The following four articles, authored by experts in our field, address the topic of transnational higher education. Please note that the views expressed are those of the individual authors and not necessarily of TAICEP. We hope to add to this collection in the future. TAICEP appreciates these authors and/or their organizations for sharing this information with our community. Please note that since this digest compiles expert articles, some overlap in foundational concepts may occur.



Article 1: TNE Definitions

The following definitions are adapted from “Transnational Education: A Primer for Evaluators and Admissions Officers” by Emily Tse (formerly with the International Education Research Foundation [IERF], now with TrueMerit), published in NAFSA’s IEM Spotlight newsletter, April 2017 issue.

A clear and consistent understanding of terminology is essential when discussing transnational education. This field is filled with specialized terms that can differ in meaning depending on the author or context. Before delving into the complexities and developments within transnational education, it is crucial to establish a solid grasp of the definitions used by authors in this area. Without a shared vocabulary, meaningful analysis and effective communication become challenging, making it all the more important to clarify key terms from the outset.

Below, you will find a list of the different types of articulation agreements and their accepted definitions.

Articulation: an arrangement whereby students from a specific program abroad are given direct admission and advanced standing/transfer credit.

Consortium: an arrangement among multiple institutions leading to a collaborative degree program. Oftentimes, students may select where to complete their coursework, within program guidelines, among the participating institutions.

Degree Validation: an arrangement whereby the provider institution validates a program offered by another institution. Upon successful completion of the program, the provider institution will award a degree to the students of the partner institution because the partner institution typically does not possess degree-granting authority.

Dual/Double Degree: two degrees, with one awarded by each partner institution, for one jointly taught program. This arrangement stands in contrast to two degrees studied and earned concurrently by a student at one school.

Education Free Zones: an arrangement that grants foreign institutions exemption from federal regulation. These zones are designed to encourage the creation of international branch campuses and other transnational collaborations. A prominent

example is Dubai International Academic City, an international education hub with more than 20 international branch campuses.

Franchising: an arrangement whereby the provider institution authorizes a partner institution to deliver a portion of its program or a program in its entirety. The provider institution awards the final qualification because the partner institution typically does not have such authority locally.

International Branch Campus: a campus established overseas that offers programs of the educational system of the provider institution's country. International branch campuses are often featured prominently in international education hubs.

International Education Hub: a city or region that has purposefully established itself as a center of higher education and research, combining domestic and foreign institutions and fostering active transnational arrangements. Examples can be found in Kuala Lumpur Education City and EduCity Iskandar, both of which are situated in Malaysia.

Joint Degree: one degree awarded for a jointly taught program. The academic records typically bear the signature and seal of both partner institutions.

Pathway/Foundation/Access Program: a preparatory program, typically lasting a year, for students who do not readily meet a university's entry requirements. While usually offered in-country, in the transnational context, these programs are also found outside the home country. Upon successful completion of the program, students are usually guaranteed direct entry to the university's designated degree program.

Twinning: an arrangement whereby the provider institution authorizes a partner institution to deliver a portion of its program. Afterwards, students complete the remainder of the program at the location of (and in the country of) the provider institution, where the final qualification is then awarded. The partner institution typically does not have degree-granting authority.

Article 2: International Branch Campuses: Credential Evaluation in a Changing Landscape

This abstract was authored by Lin Reed, Ph.D. (International Education Research Foundation) and Tara Wessel Swoboda, M.A. (International Education Research Foundation)

Abstract

As international branch campuses (IBCs) continue to expand and evolve, they present new challenges and opportunities for international credential evaluation. This article explores the growing role of IBCs within U.S. higher education's global strategy, highlighting key trends, successful models, and regional developments. It examines the complexities of evaluating academic credentials issued by IBCs while focusing on questions of institutional accreditation, degree issuance, and documentation standards. Three well-known examples of such IBCs illustrate the diverse models of institutional operations and their implications for evaluators. Insights from institutional leaders underscore the strategic importance of IBCs in global education and the need for evaluators to remain informed and adaptable. The article concludes by emphasizing that accurate evaluation of IBC credentials depends on understanding each campus's structure, accreditation, and academic alignment with the home institution.

Content

In a year marked by shifts in international education, international branch campuses (IBCs) are once again in the spotlight. As globally recognized U.S. institutions continue to expand their academic models abroad, key questions emerge: Should degrees from IBCs be considered U.S., international, or hybrid credentials? What standards should guide international credential evaluators? And what are the current trends and future directions for IBCs?

Over the past five decades, U.S. institutions have increasingly embraced internationalization—first by enrolling international students domestically, then through joint and dual-degree programs, and eventually by establishing IBCs. These campuses, located overseas but affiliated with U.S. institutions, aim to enhance branding, foster research collaboration, and promote financial sustainability. However, they also present complex challenges, including high operational costs, cultural and regulatory hurdles, faculty recruitment issues, and

potential restrictions on academic freedom.

After a surge in the early 2000s, IBCs saw retrenchment beginning in the 2010s. Nevertheless, several remain highly successful: NYU Abu Dhabi and NYU Shanghai; Duke Kunshan University in China; Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar; Northwestern University in Qatar; the University of Utah Asia Campus in South Korea; and VCUarts Qatar. Most of these campuses are concentrated in East and West Asia and the Middle East.

For international credential evaluators, IBCs present a nuanced task. A typical course-by-course evaluation includes a statement of equivalency, a breakdown of completed coursework, and a conversion of grades. Evaluators must research the institution's status and, if in a university admission role, determine how coursework may transfer or meet eligibility for academic progression.

The method of accreditation and the authority to confer degrees play a central role in how IBC credentials are assessed. Two key documents—the transcript and the degree certificate, both in the original language—are essential. These documents help identify the issuing institution, the credential awarded, and the language of instruction. Supplementary records such as curriculum outlines or attestations of language of instruction can further inform the evaluation.

Degrees may be issued by the home campus, the branch campus, or jointly. For example:

- **NYU Shanghai** graduates are awarded degrees from NYU and list it as their institution of matriculation.
- **Duke Kunshan University** is accredited by China's Ministry of Education and issues joint degrees with Duke University.
- **VCUarts Qatar** issues degrees directly from Virginia Commonwealth University in the U.S., simplifying recognition.

Once the issuing institution is identified, evaluators typically consider:

- Who founded the IBC and when?
- Is the institution accredited? If so, in which country and by which agency?
- Are all programs at the branch accredited, or only specific ones?
- Do the documents reflect the standards of the host country or the home institution?
- Does the curriculum follow the educational model of the home institution?
- Would the student qualify for transfer credit or further study in the home country?
- What is the language of instruction—home or host country?

Some IBCs provide additional guidance to aid evaluators and students. NYU Shanghai recommends including a Registrar's letter when applying to graduate schools because the campus may not appear on all recognized institution lists.¹ Duke University clarifies that not all coursework from Duke Kunshan is automatically transferable, depending on policies of the receiving institution.² VCUarts Qatar, by contrast, follows a more straightforward model—its degrees are identical to those awarded in Richmond, Virginia.³ If an IBC is accredited and issues degrees through the home campus, evaluators are encouraged to treat the credentials as they would any other from that institution.

The more closely the branch adheres to home-campus standards, the clearer the path for credential recognition. As Amir Berbić, Dean of VCUarts Qatar, explains, “Delivering curriculum here in Qatar involves a careful balance. We stay true to the academic rigor and values of our home campus in Richmond, but we also gently adapt our programs to fit the educational landscape of Qatar and the region.” He adds, “It’s a dynamic process that requires flexibility and ongoing dialogue, especially when it comes to how credentials are understood and evaluated internationally.”

¹ *University accreditation and English proficiency*. NYU Shanghai. (2023, October 27). <https://shanghai.nyu.edu/campus-life/career/students/university-accreditation-and-english-proficiency>

² *Academic programs at DKU*. Duke Office of DKU Relations. (n.d.) <https://dkurelations.duke.edu/about-dku/academic-programs-dku/>

³ Undergraduate admissions. VCUarts Qatar. (n.d.). <https://qatar.vcu.edu/admissions/undergraduate-admissions/>

Looking ahead, U.S. institutions and host countries are actively exploring new destinations for IBCs. Dr. Jill Blondin, Vice Provost for Global Initiatives at Virginia Commonwealth University, sees international partnerships and overseas campuses as vital to expanding the global reach of U.S. higher education. “The Illinois Institute of Technology’s (IIT) recent announcement of a new campus in Mumbai—the first U.S. branch in India—is an example of efforts to meet growing demand for U.S. education,” she notes.

While not all institutions have the resources to pursue IBCs, trailblazers like IIT could pave the way for others. “U.S. universities will watch IIT’s venture closely. If successful, it will certainly inspire more,” says Dr. Blondin. New markets, such as Latin America and Africa, are also gaining interest and being actively assessed.

Meanwhile, existing IBCs are evolving into global study hubs for international students pursuing U.S. degrees—often with benefits like lower costs, fewer visa challenges, rich cultural exchange, and greater local job prospects. Duke Kunshan, for instance, received a record-breaking 11,844 applications for Fall 2025 from students in 144 countries, with half from outside China.⁴ These statistics challenge the assumption that IBCs primarily serve domestic populations.

Jessica Sandberg, Vice President of External Affairs, U.S. at IDP Education and former Dean of International Enrollment at Duke Kunshan, observed the evolution firsthand. “The early IBC model often replicated the home campus without much regard for local context,” she explains. “Today’s most successful IBCs are hybrid institutions, blending international curricula with regional expertise to create culturally responsive learning environments. The result is a shared international experience that shapes students into more globally competent and collaborative individuals.” At VCUarts Qatar, “We offer a unique educational and cultural environment that encourages students to think globally while working within a local context,” says Dean Berbić, “Students learn from faculty who represent more than 15 different cultural perspectives, while maintaining a close connection to their own roots and heritage.”

⁴ Duke Kunshan University. (2025, February 13). *Nearly 12,000 students compete for 550 spots at Duke Kunshan - News: Duke Kunshan University. News.*

<https://news.dukekunshan.edu.cn/campus-news/nearly-12000-students-compete-for-550-spots-at-duke-kunshan/>

As IBCs continue to grow and diversify, how their credentials are evaluated will remain a critical topic. Ultimately, the decision for admission, employment, or licensure rests with each reviewing institution. Awareness of IBC trends can help admissions officers and evaluators better understand what documents to request and how to interpret these increasingly complex academic records.

Article 3: Assessing Qualifications Awarded Via Special Recognition or Validation Agreements

This article is courtesy of Ecctis.

Qualifications awarded via degree validation agreements are typically studied in one partner institution but awarded by another. In these instances, the partner institutions do not have the necessary authority to grant degrees or that specific type of degree. Qualifications awarded via special recognition agreements are studied at an institution operating in one country and then recognised by an authority in another. It may be the case that the institution does not have degree-awarding powers in the country of study.

When assessing qualifications awarded via special recognition or validation agreements, it is often not immediately obvious to credential evaluators that students have received their awards through one of these agreements. The final certificate or the transcript will typically hold important clues to determine the accreditation of the institution or programme of study.

For credential evaluators, it will be important to establish whether the notion of degree validation is permitted in the country of award, as well as the legitimacy of the partnership between the provider institution and validating institution. Following this, an understanding of the quality assurance mechanism is crucial, to establish whether it is sufficient to satisfy your country or organisation's requirements for recognising qualifications.

Examples

Acknowledging that different countries have different mechanisms for awarding degrees, below are several examples illustrating how degrees may be validated or awarded via special recognition arrangements around the world.

UK

In the UK system¹, institutions with degree-awarding powers are Recognised Bodies. Recognised Bodies can offer programmes leading to a recognised UK degree and confer the final degree. Institutions must be granted degree-awarding powers by the relevant UK regulators (the Office for Students in England, Scottish Government in Scotland, Welsh Government in Wales, and Northern Ireland Executive in Northern Ireland). By contrast, Listed Bodies offer study programmes leading to a recognised UK degree but cannot confer the final undergraduate or postgraduate degree. A Listed Body must cooperate with a Recognised Body and only the Recognised Body may confer the final degree.

As an example, the University of London is a Recognised Body with degree-awarding powers. In 2006, King's College London received degree-awarding powers from the Privy Council and the first degrees were conferred in 2008. It was awarded official university status in 2024. Prior to this, degrees studied at King's College London were conferred by the University of London².

The Arab Open University (AOU)³ is a recognised university offering several degree programmes taught via distance and blended learning at branches in Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia and Sudan. Several of the Bachelor and Master's degrees are validated via a partnership with the UK's Open University (OU), a Recognised Body in the UK. Reviews are conducted periodically and renewed for a five-year period. Not all programmes offered at the AOU are validated by the OU, as some are national qualifications from the country where the branch is located. If a programme has OU-validation, credential evaluators should expect to receive a final certificate issued by the OU.

¹ UK ENIC, Guide to the UK education systems_final.pdf (2023).

² King's College London, Our history | King's College London.

³ The Open University, The Arab Open University | Validation Partnerships (2025).

India

Affiliated colleges follow a prescribed curriculum and prepare students for final examinations, which are set by the affiliating universities. The University Grants Commission (UGC) provides financial assistance to over 10,000 affiliated colleges across India, many of which also hold accreditation from the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC). The final certificate is issued by the validating university, but transcripts can be provided by the university and/or the college. Typically, the university can provide the full degree transcripts, but in some instances, for example for colleges affiliated to the University of Mumbai, the university will only issue transcripts for the final year.

Autonomous colleges, of which there are over 500 in India, receive five-year autonomy from the validating university. NAAC accreditation is compulsory, as is the accreditation from the National Board of Accreditation for autonomous colleges specialising in engineering, technical or management subjects. Degree certificates are awarded by the validating university, with the name of the autonomous college included on the certificate. Colleges that have 15 or more years of autonomy may award their own degrees but must include the validating university's seal on the certificate. Autonomous colleges, as well as the validating university may issue transcripts and provisional certificates.

For credential evaluators, it will be important to verify the NAAC accreditation of the college, whether it is an affiliate or autonomous college, and to understand the validation agreement in place.

Pontifical Institutions Recognised by the Holy See

The Holy See's Dicastery for Culture and Education manages the accreditation of higher education institutions outside of Vatican City. These institutions are typically ecclesiastical universities, civil universities or standalone institutions. The degrees follow the EHEA degree system and are in pontifical subjects, i.e. theology, philosophy and Canon law. The institutions can be found all around the world and must meet the standards set by the Holy See. Other institutions may seek Dicastery accreditation for programmes offered in pontifical subjects.

The Database of Ecclesiastical Higher Education Institutions records those institutions approved by the Dicastery⁴. Credential evaluators can use this database to determine whether an institution has received recognition.

Mexico

Mexico's Sistema de Reconocimiento de Validez Oficial de Estudios (RVOE) is managed by the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP). RVOE confirms that a degree course offered by a private institution meets national standards and can be formally recognised within Mexico's education system.

It should be noted that not all private institutions need RVOE. Several prestigious private institutions have been awarded libre (free) status via a presidential decree and therefore their programmes do not need to go through the RVOE process to be recognised in Mexico.

To check whether a course has official RVOE recognition, credential evaluators can check the SEP's platform⁵, and if recognised, a course will have an RVOE number. Without the RVOE number, students might not be able to receive a valid degree, nor receive a licence if they have been studying towards a particular profession.

American Universities

Around the world, there are numerous American universities, which are typically private institutions that have been accredited by a US accreditation body, rather than belonging to the higher education system in the country where they are located. Examples of this include:

- American University of Bahrain (Bahrain)
- American University of Beirut (Lebanon)
- American University in Bulgaria (Bulgaria)
- American University in Cairo (Egypt)
- American University in Dubai (United Arab Emirates)
- American University of Paris (France)

⁴ Dicastery for Culture and Education, [Search Faculties and Institutions](#).

⁵ Secretaría de Educación Pública, <https://sirvoes.sep.gob.mx/sirvoes/mvc/consultas>.

Rather than requiring programme accreditation, which may exist in some of these countries, or validation via a recognised university, these institutions are accredited by a US accrediting body.

Credential evaluators may search the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) database⁶ to determine whether an institution, is accredited by a body recognised by CHEA or the US Department for Education.

Conclusion

As different countries explore the internationalisation of higher education and many are now facing limits on the number of international students it can recruit, it is likely that more institutions will explore validation agreements as a form of transnational education. By being awarded via a validation agreement, it could be argued that this is a more secure way of offering transnational education and providing assurance of the quality of programme being offered, as it must adhere to the standards of the awarding institution.

For credential evaluators, it will be crucial to understand how these arrangements work on a case-by-case basis, how the qualifications are quality assured, and then whether their organisation is able to recognise these types of qualification.

⁶ Council for Higher Education Accreditation, [Browse Databases and Directories | Council for Higher Education Accreditation](#).

Article 4: Evaluating Transnational Degrees: Joint, Dual, Franchise and Validated Programs

Written by Sara Ahmad and Jackie Best (IESC Fellows)

Introduction

When a credential reached our desk with four university affiliate logos, three university names on the top, and one degree designation at the bottom, we were left with more questions than answers. Which institution(s) conferred this degree? How many degrees were conferred? Is the program accredited, and in which countries? Transnational education (TNE) partnerships have experienced a boom in recent years, driven by numerous factors: technological advancement, globalization, campus internationalization, research collaboration and recruitment goals, government policy incentives, and the student demand for alternative learning options. Transnational programs offer inspiring opportunities for students and educators; however, the increasingly diverse nature of these partnerships can pose a challenge for evaluators.

AACRAO's International Education Standards Council (IESC) Fellowship program provides a unique opportunity for newer credential evaluation professionals - a guided/mentored experience through which to deepen their knowledge, expand professional networks, and contribute to the field of international credential evaluation through hands-on experience in conducting research and presenting findings to the broader community. To address the growing need to update the evaluator's toolbox for skillfully assessing transnational programs, the AACRAO International Education Standards Council (IESC) selected Joint and Dual Degrees as the research topic for their annual [IESC Fellowship](#) program for young professionals. As this year's IESC Fellows, we will share our evaluation tips with the TAICEP community for multiple collaborative partnership types, including joint, dual, franchise and validated degree programs. A webinar presenting our research in detail will be held on Tuesday, November 18 at 2:00 PM EST. The link to register is <https://www.aacrao.org/events-training/event/2025/11/18/default-calendar/joint-and-dual-degrees--findings-of-the-2024-25-international-education-standards-council-fellows>

Defining Transnational Partnerships

One of the more challenging aspects of assessing transnational education partnerships is their diversity in structure and type. The below definitions, examples and chart are helpful in comparing various program types across important dimensions.

Joint Degree Programs

A **joint degree** is a single, integrated academic program developed and delivered collaboratively by two or more higher education institutions. Students enrolled in a joint program typically study at multiple partner campuses for a global learning experience and, upon graduation, receive a single diploma that includes the names and logos of all partner institutions. The student will earn one designation (e.g. Bachelor of Arts) from multiple recognizing institutions. Joint degree programs require a high level of cooperation between partner institutions, and additional accreditation may be required for the joint program itself.

Example: Charles University (Czech Republic), Leiden University (Netherlands), Jagiellonian University (Poland) and Pompeu Fabra University (Spain) collaboratively offer a Master of Arts in European Politics and Society. The student studies in multiple countries and receives one master's degree co-signed by all partner universities.

Dual (or Double) Degree Programs

Dual (or Double) degree programs offer students the opportunity to complete two distinct degree programs at two different institutions, often in a shorter timeframe than it would take to pursue both degrees separately. Compared to joint degree programs, dual degree programs offer institutions a greater level of autonomy as curricula, tuition, language and degree requirements are at the discretion of each higher education institution. Each institution also issues its own separate transcripts and diplomas.

Example: Ritsumeikan University (Japan) and Australia National University (Australia) offer a Dual Degree program where students earn both a Bachelor in Global Liberal Arts and a Bachelor of Asia Pacific Affairs over the course of four years of study. 16 courses are taken on each campus, and overlapping coursework enables

students to receive a separate diploma from each institution.

Franchise Programs

A **franchise program** is a collaboration in which one institution (the “sending institution” or “franchiser”) authorizes an international partner to deliver its curriculum abroad. The sending institution is responsible for curriculum design, degree conferral and accreditation, and the international partner teaches the content to students overseas. In this model, the student will earn a single degree from the sending institution (not the international partner). This model is popular for international branch campuses and when expanding access to established programs in new markets.)

Validated Programs

A **validated program**, sometimes considered a subset of the franchise program model, is a partnership in which one institution (the “sending institution”) evaluates and endorses a curriculum created and delivered by an international partner. Similar to the franchise program model, the sending institution assumes responsibility for accreditation and degree issuance; however, in the validated program model, the international partner designs the curriculum and has much greater flexibility in adapting content to local markets.

Example: Arab Open University (AOU) offers a validated Bachelor of Science in Information Technology and Computing in partnership with the U.K.’s Open University (OU). AOU designs and teaches the curriculum, while OU validates it and issues the degree.

Comparative Framework

Feature	Joint Degree	Dual Degree	Franchise Program	Validated Program
Number of Degrees	One degree, jointly awarded by all partner institutions	Two degrees, one from each partner	One degree from the sending institution	One degree from the sending institution
Degree Issuance	One designated institution issues co branded documents (or all partners able to issue co branded documents)	Each institution issues its own diploma and transcript	Sending institution issues diploma and transcript	Sending institution issues diploma and transcript (or sending institution validates int. partner records by sending an additional diploma)
Accreditation	Each partner accredited; joint program may also be accredited	Each institution accredited separately	Sending institution must be accredited	Sending institution must be accredited
Curriculum	Integrated and jointly developed	Separate, with possible overlap and credit-sharing mechanisms	Developed by sending institution, delivered abroad	Developed and delivered by partner, validated by sending institution
Location of Study	Multiple campuses across partner institutions	Each campus, fulfilling each institution's requirements	Delivered at international partner campus	Delivered at international partner campus
Duration	Similar to a standard program	May take longer than one, but shorter than two separately	Similar to a single degree program	Similar to a single degree program

Tips for Credential Evaluators

- **Determine program type:** The first step in evaluating a transnational credential is to assess the program type. Is this credential a joint, dual, franchise or validated degree program? Follow-up with the institution(s) may be required to make a determination.
- **Verify degree conferral responsibility:** The next step is to confirm which institution(s) awarded the degree. This will set the stage for other important evaluative measures such as accreditation and equivalency.
- **Examine accreditation and recognition:** Ensure that the awarding institution(s) are accredited by relevant regional or national authorities, and check for program-level recognition where appropriate.
- **Reference location of study and curriculum:** Determining location of study and responsible party for curriculum design and delivery may influence decisions related to comparability and transfer credit.
- **Use research tools:** When in doubt, reference AACRAO EDGE, TAICEP, institutional websites and all other resources in your toolkit to make the most informed decisions.

Digest Conclusion

As you have just seen in these articles, transnational education (TNE) has firmly established itself as a dynamic and evolving force in the global higher education landscape, truly embodying the concept of a 'work in progress'. Its continued expansion, driven by factors like globalization, technological advancements, and the increasing demand for flexible learning options, presents both significant opportunities and complex challenges for students, institutions, and credential evaluators alike. As institutions increasingly explore international partnerships, the diversity of TNE models—from international branch campuses and joint degrees to franchise and validated programs—requires a sophisticated understanding to ensure the quality and portability of qualifications.

A recurring theme throughout the discussion of TNE is the critical importance of robust quality assurance and clear accreditation frameworks. The responsibility for academic standards ultimately lies with the awarding institution, and these standards should be comparable to those of programs delivered on the home campus. However, the lack of coordinated governance and varying national regulations can create inconsistencies, making the evaluator's role more critical than ever. The rise of fraudulent providers and misleading claims of "international recognition" further complicates the landscape, necessitating vigilance and a reliance on established verification tools and conventions like the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the UNESCO Global Recognition Convention.

For credential evaluators, navigating this complexity demands a meticulous and informed approach. Assessors must move beyond a surface-level review of documents and delve into the specifics of the educational arrangement. By systematically identifying the program type, verifying degree-conferral authority, scrutinizing accreditation, and analyzing the curriculum and location of study, evaluators can make fair and consistent recognition decisions. In certain systems, the Diploma Supplement serves as a vital instrument for transparency in this process.

The future of TNE points toward continued growth, particularly in the less visible realm of online and distance education. This expansion is closely linked to the

global rise of private higher education, which often operates with commercial objectives. Consequently, the need for stronger, clearer standards from national and international bodies is urgent to address emerging regulatory and ethical concerns and to safeguard against fraud. As TNE models continue to evolve, the principles of transparency, comparability, and shared responsibility will remain the bedrock of trust, ensuring that these cross-border qualifications are rightfully recognized and valued worldwide.

To aid in the practical application of the insights discussed throughout this digest and to support the meticulous approach required in evaluating TNE credentials, we refer you to some tools and resources in the appendix: the [Evaluator's Checklist for TNE Credentials](#), a [Comparison of Transnational Education \(TNE\) Models](#), and resources in a wiki for TAICEP members . These resources are designed to help you navigate the complexities of TNE qualifications more effectively.



Appendix 1: Evaluator's Checklist for TNE Credentials

This checklist provides a consolidated guide for credential evaluators to navigate the complexities of TNE qualifications.

Phase 1: Initial Document Review & Program Identification

The first step is to understand the nature of the credential and the educational arrangement behind it.

- ☐ Determine the Program Type: Is the credential from a:
 - Joint Degree Program?
 - Dual/Double Degree Program?
 - Franchise Program?
 - Validated Program?
 - International Branch Campus (IBC)?
 - Twinning/Articulation Agreement?
 - Distance Delivery Program?
- ☐ Identify the Awarding Institution(s):
 - Who conferred the degree?
 - Which institution's name is on the final certificate and transcript?
 - For joint degrees, are all partner institutions listed on a single diploma?
 - For dual degrees, are there separate diplomas from each institution?
- ☐ Clarify the Teaching Institution:
 - Where did the student physically study?
 - Who taught the program?
 - Was the teaching institution recognized or listed by local authorities?

Phase 2: Accreditation and Recognition Verification

This phase focuses on the official status and quality assurance of the institutions and the program itself.

- ☐ Verify Institutional Accreditation:
 - Is the primary awarding institution accredited in its home country?
 - For IBCs, is the branch campus accredited, and by which agency (home or host country)?
 - Are all partner institutions in a joint/dual program accredited separately?
- ☐ Check Program-Level Recognition:
 - Does the specific program have required professional or national recognition (e.g., RVOE in Mexico)?
 - Is the program recognized in both the home country of the awarding institution and the host country where the study took place?
 - For validated programs, is the validation agreement legitimate and permitted in the country of award?
- ☐ Utilize Research Tools:
 - Consult resources like AACRAO EDGE, TAICEP, and national bodies (e.g., CHEA in the US, UK ENIC).
 - Review institutional websites for information on partnerships and accreditation.

Phase 3: Curriculum and Program Comparability

The final phase involves assessing the academic standards and content of the program.

- ☐ Analyze the Curriculum:
 - Who designed and delivered the curriculum?
 - Does the curriculum follow the educational model of the home institution?

- ☐ Compare Academic Standards:
 - o Are the admission requirements, program duration, and assessment methods comparable to the equivalent program at the awarding institution's home campus?

- ☐ Assess Language of Instruction:
 - o What was the language of instruction?
 - o Is it consistent with the primary language of the awarding institution?

- ☐ Review Official Documents for Clues:
 - o Examine transcripts and the diploma supplement for any indication of the TNE arrangement, study location, or validating body.
 - o For IBC credentials, if the campus is fully accredited and issues degrees through the home campus, the credentials should be treated as any other from that institution.

Appendix II: Comparison of TNE Models

The following table expands on the various TNE models presented in the digest, offering a detailed comparison across several key features to help clarify the distinctions between them.

Feature	Joint Degree	Dual/Double Degree	Franchise Program	Validated Program	Twinning/ Articulation Program	Branch Campus	Distance Delivery
Number of Degrees	One degree, jointly awarded by all partner institutions.	Two separate degrees, one from each partner institution.	One degree from the sending (franchiser) institution.	One degree from the sending (validating) institution.	One degree from the provider institution.	One degree from the provider (home) institution or its branch.	One degree from the awarding institution.
Degree Issuance	A single co-branded diploma and transcript are issued, bearing the names of all partners.	Each institution issues its own separate diploma and transcript.	The sending institution issues the diploma and transcript.	The sending institution issues the diploma and transcript.	The final qualification is awarded by the provider institution.	The degree may be issued by the home campus, the branch campus, or jointly.	The awarding institution issues the diploma and transcript.
Accreditation	Each partner institution is accredited, and the joint program itself may also require accreditation.	Each institution is accredited separately.	The sending institution is responsible for accreditation.	The sending institution is responsible for accreditation.	The provider HEI holds the accreditation.	The branch campus is accredited through the home institution, but may also have host country recognition.	The awarding institution must be accredited.
Curriculum	An integrated curriculum is developed and delivered jointly by all partner institutions.	Each institution has its own curriculum though there may be overlap and credit sharing.	Developed by the sending institution and delivered by the international partner.	Developed by the partner institution and endorsed (validated) by the sending institution.	The curriculum is designed by the provider HEI.	The curriculum generally follows the educational model of the home institution.	The curriculum is designed and delivered by the awarding institution.
Location of Study	Students typically study at multiple partner campuses.	Students often study at both partner campuses.	The program is delivered entirely at the international partner's campus.	The program is delivered entirely at the international partner's campus.	Students begin at the partner institution and complete their studies at the provider institution's home campus.	The entire program is delivered at the campus established abroad.	Students study online from their own country.

Appendix III: Additional Resources for TAICEP Members

For TAICEP members, conference recordings, slides, webinars, and Gaggle archives offering further insights into TNE trends, regulatory challenges, and practical guidance for credential evaluators can be found by logging in to the [Transnational Education](#) section in the training area of the TAICEP Wiki.

A. General Overviews & Recognition Climate

- 2017 TAICEP Rome Conference: “**Cross Border Higher Education**”
 - **Description:** This presentation provides an overview of the broader landscape of cross-border higher education, which encompasses various TNE models.
- 2021 TAICEP Virtual Conference: “**Improving the Recognition Climate for Transnational Education Qualifications**”
 - **Description:** This resource focuses on strategies and initiatives aimed at enhancing the acceptance and validation of TNE qualifications globally.

B. Evaluator Guidance & Challenges

- 2023 TAICEP Redondo Beach Conference: “**Evaluating Qualifications from Transnational Education**”
 - **Description:** These presentation slides offer guidance and methodologies specifically for credential evaluators on how to properly assess academic qualifications from various TNE programs.
- 2020 TAICEP Virtual Conference: “**TNE: The Challenges for Evaluators**”
 - **Description:** This session addresses common difficulties and complex issues faced by credential evaluators when assessing degrees and certificates from TNE arrangements.
- 2019 TAICEP Vancouver Conference: “**The Quandaries of Evaluating TNE Programs & Credentials**”
 - **Description:** These slides delve into perplexing scenarios and specific dilemmas encountered during the evaluation of credentials from transnational education programs.
- 4/15/25 Gaggle, “**Transnational UK 3-year degree**” PDF

- **Description:** This document likely analyzes the structure and evaluation of three-year bachelor's degrees offered through United Kingdom-based TNE programs.
- 2017 TAICEP Rome Conference: “**International Secondary Schools on Domestic Soil**”
 - **Description:** This resource examines the phenomenon of international high schools operating within a country and presents specific case studies to illustrate the model.

C. Regional Focus & Trends

- 2/11/25 The Pie News Article: “[Australia strengthens its standing in India through TNE collaboration](#)”
 - **Description:** This article highlights how Australia is leveraging TNE partnerships to enhance its educational influence and relationships within India.
- 2/7/25 The Pie News Article: “[India a major partnership hub as TNE interest booms](#)”
 - **Description:** This article explores the growing trend of India becoming a central location for international TNE collaborations due to a surge in demand and interest.
- 2024, CIMEA, MAREN and AdREN Projects: Transnational Education in the Adriatic and Mediterranean Regions “[Regulation, quality assurance and information provision in 7 countries](#)”
 - **Description:** This report details specific TNE regulations, quality assurance mechanisms, and information transparency in seven countries within the Adriatic and Mediterranean areas.

D. Policy & Regulation

- 4/9/25 University World News Article: “[TNE expansion: A new frontier in need of stronger regulation](#)”
 - **Description:** This article argues for the necessity of improved and more robust regulatory frameworks to govern the rapid global expansion of transnational education.